Piper excelsum subsp. psittacorum

COMMON NAMES
kawakawa, pepper tree

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: OL, SO
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION
Fleshy shrub with jointed green twigs bearing large green glossy heart-shaped thin leaves with hard green flower spikes to 200mm long inhabiting the Kermadec Island. Leaves to 200mm wide, veins radiating from stalk, slightly peppery to taste. Fruit orange.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Dioecious shrub to small suckering tree up to 3 m tall, branching from base. Branches terete up to 40 mm diameter, initially bright green, maturing dull greenish-brown. Leaves mildly aromatic with a slight peppery taste when chewed; petioles u-shaped in cross-section, upper surface grooved, 20-80 mm long, green to yellow-green; lamina slightly bullate, 50-180 × 60-200 mm, pale green to dark green, rarely yellow-green, broadly ovate to suborbicular, base cordate, rounded or rarely with ends overlapping, apex distinctly acuminate, margins entire; main nerves 5-9, raised slightly above lamina surface. Inflorescence a solitary or paired spike bearing numerous, crowded flowers on a slender rachis, each flower subtended by a peltate scale 1.5-2.0 mm diameter; male spikes to 200 mm long, often faintly tapered, stamens 2-3; female spikes 40-80 mm long, style 3-4, minute; ovary ovoid. Fruiting spike 12-20 mm diameter, yellow or orange when ripe. Fruit fleshy, sweet, coalescent, with dimpled apex. Seeds 1.8-2.0 mm long, ellipsoid, grooved with 3-4 furrows, hard, peppery when crushed.

SIMILAR TAXA
Macropiper excelsum subsp. psittacorum is only known in the New Zealand Botanical Region from Raoul Island (and Norfolk Island if one wishes to include it in the New Zealand Botanical region). On either island it is the only representative of the genus present so it could not be confused with anything else. However, this subspecies is very rarely cultivated in New Zealand and so could be confused in the garden with other members of the Macropiper excelsum complex. From all of these it differs by its very thin, membranous, bullate leaves which are weakly aromatic and have almost no discernible peppery taste. It also differs by the male spikes which are the longest of the M. excelsum complex, very narrow and finely tapered. The name M. excelsum subsp. psittacorum is still widely, though incorrectly applied by many horticulturists to M. excelsum subsp. peltatum f. peltatum and sometimes even M. excelsum subsp. excelsum (see Taxonomic Notes below).

Raoul island. Photographer: John Barkla, Licence: CC BY.

Raoul island. Photographer: John Barkla, Licence: CC BY.

DISTRIBUTION
Indigenous. Kermadec Islands (Raoul Island). Also Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands.

HABITAT
Coastal forest where it is often an important component of the shrub layer.

THREATS
Not Threatened. Listed because in New Zealand it is only known from Raoul Island, where it is abundant.

GENUS
Piper

FAMILY
Piperaceae

AUTHORITY
Piper excelsum subsp. psittacorum (Endl.) de Lange

SYNONYMS
Macropiper psittacorum (Endl.) Miq.; Macropiper excelsum f. psittacorum (Endl.) A.C.Smith, Piper psittacorum Endl., Piper excelsum var. majus Cheeseman, Macropiper excelsum var. majus (Cheeseman) Allan

TAXONOMIC NOTES
The generic distinction between *Macropiper* and *Piper* has always been tenuous. Recently Jaramillo et al. (2008) have shown that *Macropiper* should be merged in *Piper*. However, they did not effect the full transfer of the New Zealand taxa to *Piper*. This action was taken by de Lange (2012) for *Macropiper excelsum* subsp. *psittacorum*, *Macropiper excelsum* subsp. *peltatum* f. *peltatum* and f. *delange*i.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
August - November

FRUITING
Throughout the year

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easily grown from semi-hardwood cuttings and fresh seed. Rather cold sensitive (even in Auckland). An attractive plant, well worth the effort of cultivating. It does best in semi-shade in a free draining but moist soil. Once established can tolerate considerable drought.

ETYMOLOGY
piper: Pepper
excelsum: Tall

NVS CODE
PIPESS

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 26

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: OL, SO
2012 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: OL, SO
2009 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: SO, OL
2004 | Range Restricted
Jump to current conservation status

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

de Lange, P.J. 2012: Taxonomic notes on the New Zealand flora: new names in *Piper* (Piperaceae). *New Zealand Journal of Botany* DOI:10.1080/0028825X.2012.708904

Jaramillo, M.A.; Callejas, R; Davidson, C.; Smith, J.F.; Stevens, A.C.; Tepe, E.J. 2008: A phylogeny of the tropical genus *Piper* using ITS and the chloroplast intron psbJ-petA. Systematic Botany 33: 647-660.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange 30 August 2005. Description based on live plants (wild and cultivated) and herbarium specimens.

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

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MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/piper-excelsum-subsp-psittacorum/

PDF DATE

25 May 2026